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ABSTRACT

Various strategies have been designed to address the needs of individuals who require supplementary assistance to maximize their potential through accelerated, compensatory, or special education programs. Proper identification of those students who can benefit the most from such services has become an important consideration for educators. In the case of Chapter 1, local school districts are required to conduct an annual needs assessment to qualify for continued federal funding. While this information is designated for use in program planning and, by implication, for student selection, it appears that the needs assessment process is not often approached with an awareness of its full potential. In this paper, the connection between needs assessment and student selection activities is demonstrated. In addition, techniques developed at a Chapter 1 Technical Assistance Center for the practical application of needs assessment data to the problem of selecting students for various special programs are outlined. Finally, the feasibility of consolidating presently-isolated information collection efforts into a model for accurate needs assessment and student identification is explored. (PN)

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NEEDS ASSESSMENT: A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO STUDENT SELECTION FOR SPECIAL PROGRAMS

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While employed at a Technical Assistance Center (TAC VI) serving a five-state region (Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas), this evaluator conferred with state and local education agencies on strategies to use in accurate student selection for Title I programs. As a result, a personal awareness of practical concerns developed. On a related issue, local school districts are required to conduct an annual needs assessment to qualify for continued federal funding of Chapter I activities. While the information so derived is designated for use in program planning and, by implication, for student selection, it appears that school personnel do not often approach the needs assessment process with an awareness of its full potential.

In this paper, the connection between needs assessment and student selection activities is demonstrated. In addition, techniques developed at TAC VI for the practical application of needs assessment data to the problem of selecting students for various special programs are outlined, and field experiences are cited when possible to highlight topics shown to be of greatest utility and interest to local educators/evaluators. Finally, the feasibility of consolidating presently-isolated information collection efforts into a model for accurate needs assessment and student identification is explored.

EXPOSITION OF THE ISSUE

In the complex world of education, there are a number of individuals who, for a variety of reasons, do not fit the mold labelled "average student". Through no essential fault of their own they may have either a greater or lesser amount of those intangible characteristics that determine one's facility for learning. In other instances, mental faculties may be unimpaired but physical abnormalities prevent total assimilation into the daily routine of a typical school. Consequently, alternative strategies have been designed to address the needs of children who require supplementary assistance to maximize their potential through accelerated, compensatory, or special education programs.

While proper identification of those students who could benefit the most from such services has historically been a concern of educators, this is especially the case in view of current reductions in funding. Failure to diagnose learning styles that could be more effectively handled in special environments and placement of students in academic settings that are incompatible with their needs constitute a waste of valuable resources. Not only are teachers, time, and materials unsuitably assigned, but students are also placed at an unnecessary academic disadvantage. In light of constant exhortations to "get the most out of your money", this mismatch of academic needs and settings is even more lamentable. It would appear that careful determination of individual student requirements would be a logical first step in proper academic placement.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NEEDS ASSESSMENT AND STUDENT SELECTION

Definition of Terms

In the context of this discussion, essential terms will be specifically defined. Needs assessment will denote a systematic procedure for determining 1) what goals and objectives a program should try to achieve, and 2) how well these aims are being met. Student selection will also refer to systematic procedures, but in this case the goal will be the proper identification of those students who could benefit the msot from placement in various special programs. Finally, special programs themselves are defined as any academic settings which deviate in some essential way (e.g. class size, available equipment, admissions criteria; from standard school operations.

Procedural Progression

It is unlikely that many school administrators determine resource allocation without reference to data which relate to perceived and/or documented needs for service. This information serves as a point of departure for the identification of specific goals and objectives which would be most appropriate for a given school district to address. In support of such a common-sense approach, the federal government

requires state and local districts to conduct annual needs assessments if they wish to qualify for continued funding of programs such as Chapter I. While the information so derived is designated for use in program planning, this constitutes just one possible application of the data-collection efforts.

Since the need to establish proper student selection criteria follows directly from decisions to provide various special programs in the first place, the data used for these two procedures should be complementary. In fact, they could be identical. Both needs assessment and student selection efforts are directed at the identification of academic, developmental, and/or physiological areas in which to appropriate available resources. That is, the essential task is to find out 1) where help is needed and 2) who most needs the help. Furthermore, the answer to either one of these questions usually implies the answer to the other question as well.

To take advantage of the compatability of needs assessment and student selection procedures, the potential applications of various data-collection pursuits must be understood. If educators approach their tasks in an organized and predetermined manner, a minimal amount of data could be used to fulfill several different requirements.

PRACTICAL TRAINING PROCEDURES

TAC Approach

Over the past few years, the then-Title I Technical Assistance Center serving the southwestern region of the United States (TAC VI) has received a number of requests for guidance on strategies for both accurate student selection and proper needs asssessment. In response to these inquiries, the TAC VI staff developed workshop presentations to outline techniques for the conduct of needs assessments, suggest various student selection procedures, and demonstrate the practical application of needs assessment data when identifying students for various special programs.

The underlying theme of these TAC presentations is the importance of the planning stages for any data-gathering efforts. By careful

consideration of both an educator's immediate needs for information and the potential application of data to other areas of concern, local investigations can be made more cost-effective in terms of resources and time.

Needs Assessment Procedures

In the TAC workshop approach, the purposes of needs assessment are listed primarily as : 1) identify major problems; 2) set priorities; and 3) make decisions about resource allocation. Next, the need to verbalize specific reasons for the study, identify exact data sources, and outline collection, reporting, and application procedures is discussed to underline the importance of the planning stages. Participants are urged to consider these issues so problems can be anticipated early enough to help avoid wasted efforts. Then, suggested steps to follow when conducting a needs assessment are presented. These include the determination of the study's scope, identification of input sources, design or adaptation of data-collection instruments, tabulation and analysis of results, and establishment of priorities. Finally, workshop participants are given the opportunity to devise their own strategies for the design and conduct of a local needs assessment. In the ensuing discussion, the necessity of acquiring a fairly thorough comprehension of the situation to be investigated is usually identified by participants as an essential first step in a worthwhile needs assessment study.

Student Selection Procedures

In the TAC VI workshop approach to student selection, the importance of establishing a systematic procedure for student identification is stressed. In addition, the need for educators to ensure that defensible and unambiguous decisions are made is noted. A discussion is held on the relative merits of objective, subjective and composite measures of performance, followed by a presentation of various methods of student selection. In addition to objective test scores, measures such as teacher ratings of students, attendance records, and individual assessment of personal needs are suggested for consideration by decision-makers.

Through use of an example to illustrate how the composition of the group selected for a special program can change depending on which criteria are employed, workshop participants are advised about the importance of the careful selection of, and adherence to, cutoff scores on selection measures. A consistent theme throughout the workshop involves the general importance of maintaining stable and well-defined selection criteria, regardless of which specific ones are actually used.

Suggested Areas of Emphasis

Although the above procedures might sound rather simplistic to experienced evaluators or seem too obvious to merit detailed consideration, the TAC VI staff has found that neither supposition is necessarily correct. As a result of numerous workshop sessions on these topics, it was concluded that basic tenets of evaluation were often violated in the name of well-meaning educational assessment. The local personnel responsible for these studies are rarely evaluators by training or even preference, so it is generally advisable to provide them assistance that emphasizes straightforward procedures and practical applications of valid and reliable results.

When discussing needs assessment and student selection in general, several topics have been of particular interest to the workshop audiences. First, participants frequently assume that potential sources of data are limited to scores on objective, standardized tests. Although the "magic" associated with such numbers generally has faded, many educators are still reluctant to abandon these measures completely. If trained evaluators point out additional sources of data and encourage their use, the potential is increased for collecting local information that is more meaningful and, hence, more likely to be used. In addition, educators often need to be reminded of the specific reasons why decision-making based on composite measures is generally preferable to reliance on a single, potentially invalid, standardized score.

Another technique that has generated much interest from workshop participants involves the tabulation of evaluation results. Although many school districts recognize and appreciate the utility of opinion

data, in general little thought has been given in the past to appropriate computational procedures for subjective data. In the course of a typical workshop, a summary is offered of the general advantages and disadvantages of objective and subjective information sources. Then, the basic computations for weighting means, equalizing ranges, and rank ordering based on multiple criteria are presented. While this portion of the workshop might confuse or even intimidate several participants, such problems are offset by the likelihood that greater care will be taken in the future when different kinds of information are combined in hopes of deriving some one meaningful number.

One additional topic that produces consistent reactions from the workshop audiences involves the importance of careful planning. After bestowing repeated exhortations to document a priori the specific aspects of a given needs assessment or student selection study, this researcher has accepted the fact that such recommendations are likely to be ignored in a number of cases. Although there is little disagreement among educators in general on the importance of detailed planning, the realities of time and staff limitations are often inescapable at the district level. The ideal circumstances for conducting a local evaluation study are rarely encountered, so it is necessary to adapt constantly the recommended procedures to make them fit into the actual day-to-day functioning of a school.

CONSOLIDATION OF EFFORTS

It is generally conceded that a great deal of information is collected, aggregated, possibly heeded, then inevitably and forgettably filed during the course of a school year. Typically the data-gathering activities are isolated events, with no integration of the different findings into a multi-faceted picture of a given student, class, or district. It is predictable , therefore, that duplications of effort will result without the establishment of well-defined state and local data bases.

In many cases, a specific piece of information could be used to make decisions on more than one academic question. Likewise, a single

data collection activity could be designed to address various requests for documentation. If economy of effort and resources is desired, then one essential requirement is thoughtful planning.

It has been previously stated that there is a great deal of overlap between needs assessment and student selection efforts. To go a step further, it could be said that, if basic guidelines for a proper local needs assessment are followed, then the resulting data will meet the criteria as acceptable student selection measures, and consequently could be used to document both activities. Unfortunately, many people continue to view each request for information as a separate circumstance, and do not recognize the possibility of complementary activities.

One approach to promoting more efficient local evaluation efforts involves the possible development of consolidated models for data collection. For example, a model which would allow for both accurate needs assessment and student selection in a single process might be devised. Since these two activities, needs assessment and student selection, are required of a large number of school districts across the country, they would seem to be worthy of additional study, especially if a more organized approach to common concerns would result.

There are several major implications in the development of a consolidated model which should be mentioned here. First, it would be necessary to ascertain the exact nature of the data currently used to make needs assessment and student selection decisions across the country. Although similarities are anticipated to emerge, it is equally likely that discrepancies among techniques will need to be resolved as well.

Second, in order for a proposed model to be applicable in different (albeit related) decision-making situations, it would be requisite to establish a common data base among the various programs involved. Also, if the maintenance of the status quo is to be avoided, a further implication is the acceptance of multi-purpose data bits (e.g. if percentile scores on standardized tests were recorded, they could be used on a <u>group</u> level to indicate the need for a gifted/talented class, and also on an <u>individual</u> level to identify students for the program).

An additional consideration for model development relates to the issue of local autonomy. If a general model for needs assessment/ student selection were developed, it likely would incorporate the need to prescribe, to a certain degree, what would constitute acceptable data sources. Although users of the model might be presented "menus" from which to tailor their own local data bases, it nevertheless seems inevitable that some guidelines and limits would have to be established (e.g. on maximum number of criteria allowed in the derivation of composite scores) for the model to prove feasible across diverse programs. Consequently, there would be some tradeoff between the concepts of local autonomy and general adaptability under a viable consolidated model, but this seems to be the case whenever an attempt is made to standardize behavior.

SUMMARY

While it it indisputable that school personnel routinely amass more information than they need, and certainly more than they use, another reality is that the federal government currently is decreasing its presence in the daily operations of the education system (witness the regulations pertaining to Chapter I programs). Therefore, it is unlikely that either the development of, or the support for, a prescriptive model for needs assessment/student selection will be forthcoming from federal offices. However, state and local efforts to streamline and consolidate data-collection activities should not be abandoned as a result. If educators recognize the importance of establishing systematic and clearly-defined procedures for decision-making based on meaningful and sufficient data, reforms in local and state practices are likely to result. It should be noted that this outcome echoes one of the major potential benefits attributed to the proposed needs assessment/student selection model. The fact that the goal is attained, regardless of the circumstances, might suffice as an acceptable and realistic compromise to the problem of model development.